“Culture of life” or culture of lies: an exchange with WSWS readers on the Terri Schiavo case

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The *World Socialist Web Site* has received numerous letters in response to articles on the Terri Schiavo case posted on March 21 and March 23. (See “Bush, Congress intervene in Terri Schiavo case: political thuggery in the service of reaction,” “The Schiavo case: Bush and Congress trample on science and the Constitution,” “Democrats complicit with Christian right, Republicans in Schiavo case”).

Many of the letters to the WSWS endorse our criticism of the Bush administration and express sympathy for Michael Schiavo, Terri’s husband, who made the decision to terminate life support for the severely brain-damaged woman. (See: “Letters from WSWS readers on the Schiavo case”).

A majority of the letters to the WSWS, however, support Terri Schiavo’s parents, Robert and Mary Schindler, and their efforts to have the feeding tube restored. Some of these letters are simply abusive, or express a fundamentalist religious viewpoint raised to the level of hysteria. But the most characteristic feature of the letters purporting to defend Terri Schiavo is the lack of information, confusion, or outright ignorance they reveal.

This reflects several interrelated features of contemporary America, including the grotesque falsifications pumped out by Christian fundamentalist and ultra-right groups and their media mouthpieces such as Fox News, and the refusal of the “mainstream” media, as well as the Democratic Party, to mount any serious opposition to this pollution of public discourse.

This barrage of lies has to some extent disarmed the public. Many people are instinctively opposed to the campaign of right-wing hysteria on the Schiavo case, and uneasy over the constitutional implications of the congressional intervention. Opinion polls show overwhelming public opposition to the intervention of Bush and Congress. Nevertheless, there is a general lack of clarity on how to resist this right-wing offensive. The corruption of the media and the spinelessness of the liberals combine to disorient public opinion.

This is bound up with the lowering of intellectual and cultural standards in the US resulting from a protracted and relentless assault on science and rational thought. This takes the form of attacks on the science of evolution, areas of investigation such as stem cell research, and a serious approach to history. As a result of this officially sanctioned drive to “dumb down” the population, large sections of the public find it difficult to understand the issues involved in the Schiavo controversy. The general debasement of intellectual life, moreover, renders many people vulnerable to religious prejudices.

The falsehoods peddled by the right wing fall into two major groups: first, claims that Terri is not in a vegetative state, but conscious, aware, even responsive; second, that she is the victim of abuse by her husband Michael, who should therefore be disqualified as her guardian. We will examine each in turn.

Letter writer CR rejects our report that, according to numerous neurologists, Terri Schiavo has no brain function. “This, I am afraid, is patently untrue. Terri is able to communicate with sound and facial expressions. The doctors who examined her, for reasons known to themselves, have dismissed these reactions as involuntary reflexes!”

CR cites an account of an eyewitness who was in Schiavo’s hospice room (it isn’t clear from the letter if this is CR herself or someone else), declaring that Terri attempted to respond affirmatively when asked if she wanted to live. CR writes: “She has been filmed looking deeply into her mother’s eyes and responding with great pleasure to her mother. Doctors and therapists who have examined Terri also assert that with therapy Terri’s condition could improve greatly. Unfortunately, Michael Schiavo has denied Terri this therapy, despite a colossal payout meant for such purposes. Not one penny has been used to rehabilitate her.”

Letter writer RR writes: “Mr. Martin wrote that Terri has had no brain function for 15 years. This appears to be a serious misrepresentation of her condition. That said, when Bush says ‘We must err on the side of life,’ he should consider other tactics to get his way than cluster bombs and depleted uranium munitions. We can’t be pro-life and pro-war.”

While RR at least acknowledges the cynicism of Bush’s position, both he and CR are deeply mistaken about Terri Schiavo’s medical condition. There is no credible medical evidence to dispute the diagnosis of a persistent, and now permanent, vegetative state. Only two doctors have been quoted in the media opposing this diagnosis, both of them representatives of the Christian fundamentalist right, one with a direct financial interest in supposed “therapy” for the irredeemably brain-damaged.

Dr. Ronald Cranford, a neurologist at the University of Minnesota Medical School who was called in by the Florida courts to examine Terri Schiavo, said: “You’ll not find any credible neurologist or neurosurgeon to get involved at this point and say she’s not vegetative.” He told the *New York Times*, “Her CAT scan shows massive shrinkage of the brain. Her EEG is flat—flat. There’s no electrical activity coming from her brain.”

Repeated neurological examinations have confirmed that Terri Schiavo’s cerebral cortex was irreparably damaged by the oxygen deprivation caused by a stoppage of her heart in 1990. In the absence of oxygen, the complex cells of the cerebral cortex, which control all the higher intellectual functions, including sensation, reasoning, emotion and the feeling of pain, begin to break down. In Terri’s case, they have degenerated into a liquefied state from which there is no possibility of recovery. As Michael Schiavo asked in one court hearing, “Can you regrow a brain?”

There are two bases for rejecting this scientific evidence. The first is the

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religious conception that essentially denies the material basis of consciousness. Even without a functioning brain, goes that argument, Terri Schiavo has a soul, and to allow her to die is murder.

This argument is irrefutable by reasoned argument, because it is irrational. But to make it the basis of medical decisions and public policy is to destroy the constitutional separation between church and state and make the dogma of the Christian fundamentalists and the Roman Catholic Church a law for every American. Moreover, it would compel the indefinite prolongation of life support for every terminally ill patient, no matter how bad their condition: an act of surpassing cruelty, both for the dying and their families.

The second basis for denying the sad reality of Terri Schiavo's condition is the argument made by CR and others, based on her seeming responsiveness to visitors. The principal "evidence" here is the videotape circulated by her parents, which is selectively edited from hours of footage to give a false impression to the viewing public, who are not aware how the tape was put together.

Neurologists have explained repeatedly that, unlike a patient in a coma, the victim of a persistent vegetative state is wakeful, with eyes open and moving randomly. To immediate family members, even an occasional apparent response to an external stimulus may seem proof that their loved one is still "with" them, in some sense. This is an understandable misconception, which is now being cynically exploited by those who care nothing for Terri Schiavo the person, but seek to exploit her as a right-wing symbol.

Despite the appearances, a person in a persistent vegetative state is in far worse condition from a medical standpoint than someone in a coma, as attested by the measurements of electrical activity in the brain and other neurological data. To reject this finding is, once again, to reject science in the favor of self-delusion or religious mythmaking.

Another reader, JN, writes: "I am the parent of a handicapped boy, and I can tell you, I am completely on the side of Terri's parents. You can bet I would do the same for my son. How would you like to be starved to death? How would you like to not even be given a drink? They would not do this to death row inmates or the worst of criminals. Why on earth is it OK to do this to a disabled woman?"

In a similar vein, PL writes: "You do a good job of showing the normal ugliness from DeLay and company. There are a lot of problems with this case, however, and you didn't touch on several of them. There are things like statements by doctors and ex-girlfriends, and affidavits by nurses saying that the major media coverage of this is dramatically wrong. For example, a nurse at the hospice saying she could feed herself sometimes but the husband was against it and demanded the use of feeding tubes...

"The diagnosis of 'persistent vegetative state' sounds like the usual crap we poor residents of Florida have to put up with. This shouldn't change anyone's take on the religious right, but this case has the potential for helping to bring on the economizing we all know is coming for the disabled."

Such comments reflect the impact of the "big-lie" technique of the Republican right, which has sought to portray Terri Schiavo as a disabled person who is the victim of discrimination. (Senator Tom Harkin, a liberal Democrat from Iowa, has adopted this stance as well).

Terri Schiavo is not handicapped or disabled in any reasonable meaning of that term. She does not suffer from autism, mental retardation, crippling nerve or muscle damage or any other condition typically categorized as disability. Her brain function is zero. Her neuro-muscular control is zero. She does not respond to stimuli—or more precisely, there is no correlation between her random eye movements or sounds, and external stimuli.

The other major category of falsification in the "pro-life" letters is the claim that Terri Schiavo is the victim of abuse by her husband Michael, who is supposedly motivated by the hope of financial gain from her death. Such claims, of an increasingly scurrilous nature, have been circulated both by the Schindler family and their fundamentalist backers. A few examples:

Letter writer LR writes: "If this is political 'thuggery' then that is wonderful. You seem to forget, the woman will be starved to death for about two weeks. Her husband is also under suspicion of having injured Terri (the reason she is in this condition)."

JH writes from Australia: "There is a real possibility that her brain damage was caused by husband Michael Schiavo's attempt to murder her by strangulation in 1990, after discovering that she planned to leave and divorce him after six years of married life during which he physically abused her and controlled her movements... WSWS should not support a cunning and disturbed man's attempt to use a corrupt legal system to murder his wife."

Such assertions, absolutely unsubstantiated and defamatory, in large part reflect a campaign of abuse and slander against a private individual, Michael Schiavo, directed from the highest levels of the government and media. There is in this witch-hunt no small degree of incitement to violence against an innocent man.

There is no truth to these allegations. Terri Schiavo's brain damage is the result of a heart stoppage brought on by a potassium imbalance believed to be caused by the eating disorder bulimia. By all accounts, Michael Schiavo was devastated by his wife's collapse and took numerous actions to try to alleviate her condition.

According to the 2003 report commissioned by Florida Governor Jeb Bush and written by Jay Wolfson, a professor of public health and medicine at the University of South Florida, Schiavo took his wife to California in 1990 for experimental treatment and himself received specialized training as a nurse to assist in her care. Wolfson dismissed accusations that Michael Schiavo abused Terri, writing, "the evidence is incontrovertible that he gave his heart and soul to her treatment and care."

Wolfson added—with a human empathy entirely absent from the right-wing attacks on Michael Schiavo—"The Schindlers and the Schiavos are normal, decent people who have found themselves within the construct of an exceptional circumstance which none of them, indeed, few normal people could have imagined."

That leaves the charge that Michael Schiavo is a fortune hunter, supposedly profiting from the million-dollar malpractice settlement from a lawsuit which he and the Schindlers filed over Terri's initial medical care. (This is the type of suit that the Bush administration would eliminate if its planned legislation against medical malpractice claims passes Congress in the next few months).

Letter writer LRP writes: "I wonder, though, why you neglected to mention that Mr. Schiavo showed no interest in the demise of his wife for several years, until a malpractice suit was decided in her favor for $1,000,000. Now, if he has no interest in the money, he can simply divorce her."

RC from British Columbia writes: "Had her husband not been more interested in the million-plus dollars he got when he sued the hospital, a girl friend he lives with along with a child, and had he allowed physical therapy while she could still feed herself—she might be further along than she is."

The 1993 medical malpractice award provided $750,000 for Terri's medical care and upkeep, all but $40,000 of which has been spent. The depletion of those funds is not a factor in the current dispute over terminating life support, because the hospice is not charging for her care. Michael Schiavo received in addition a payment of $300,000 for his suffering from the loss of his wife, and for the large amount of time he spent taking care of her in her vegetative state.

Wolfson's report addresses the charges of financial motivation as well, finding no grounds for them, and reporting there was "no evidence in the record of the trust administration documents of any mismanagement of Theresa's estate, and the records on this matter are excellently

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maintained."

There is one final unsigned letter to the WSWS worth noting. It comments:

"Oh shut up. Let them intervene, why on earth do you have to analyze the crap out of everything? Is it so hard to believe that maybe, just maybe, people actually sincerely believe in Terry Schiavo's cause? Whoever wrote this is a warped individual."

The writer's complaint "why on earth do you have [to] analyze" sums up the position of the religious zealots. They oppose science. They oppose political analysis. Indeed, they oppose thought itself. They make an appeal to unreasoning emotion. They wallow in ignorance and prejudice and seek to impose their bigotry on the American people.

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